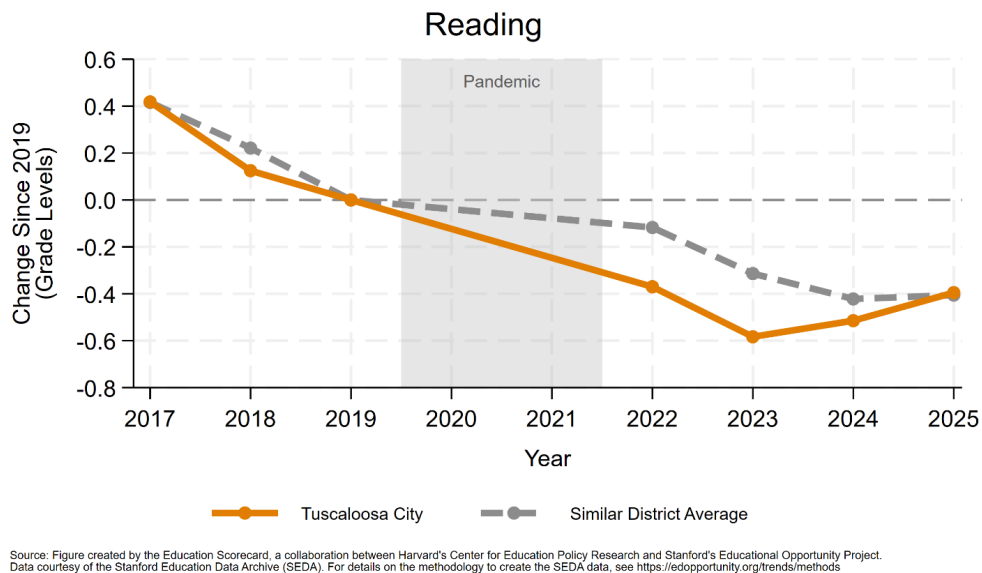
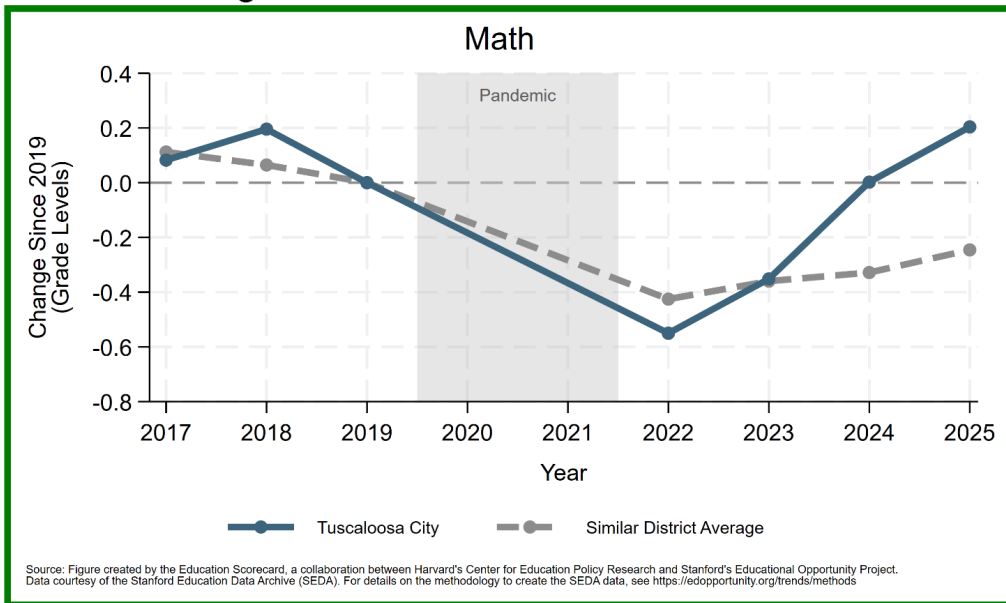


Tuscaloosa City Schools

Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Tuscaloosa City, AL

Rising Faster than Similar Districts in Math



Similar Districts: Dothan City, Montgomery County, Birmingham City, Opelika City, Huntsville City

Student Demographics:

Total students: 11,303

Black: 66.5%

White: 23.1%

Hispanic: 5.9%

Asian: 2.1%

American Indian: .5%

Pacific Islander: .18%

Other: 1.66%

Free or reduced lunch: 71%

Dr. Mike Daria, Superintendent

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- “Our progress in TCS is driven by the powerful combination of committed educators and a clear, focused strategic plan. Together, we are a system unwavering in our commitment to ensuring “each and every” student achieves success.”

Dr. James Pope, Deputy Superintendent of Teaching and Learning

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- “The success of Tuscaloosa City Schools is the result of sustained focus, aligned leadership, and an unwavering belief that every student can achieve at high levels. By committing to a consistent strategy around literacy, numeracy, school culture, and college and career readiness, and by investing deeply in our people, we have built a system that responds to student needs in real time. Our progress reflects not a single initiative, but a disciplined approach to continuous improvement that ensures each and every student in every school has access to high-quality instruction and the support they need to succeed.”

Background:

Tuscaloosa City Schools (TCS) serves over 11,000 PK-12 students across 21 schools in the city of Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Although Tuscaloosa is best known as home to the University of Alabama, the district it serves is racially and economically diverse, with approximately [70% of its students identified as economically](#) disadvantaged. Under Superintendent Dr. Mike Daria, who has led the district since 2016 after three decades of service as a TCS English teacher, principal, and central office leader, TCS has pursued a sustained “every student” strategy, raising expectations for all students, regardless of school or subgroup. Daria was named [2023 Alabama Superintendent of the Year](#) by the School Superintendents of Alabama.

TCS’s progress is evident in both state and national data. On the Alabama State Department of Education’s district report card, [TCS climbed from a score of 78 in 2017 to 86 in 2025](#), the district’s [highest-ever score](#). The district’s trajectory reflects the alignment of a consistent local strategy with two transformative state policies: The [Alabama Literacy Act](#) (2019) and the [Alabama Numeracy Act](#) (2022). [State investments in literacy](#) have tripled since 2019, with [Alabama exceeding \\$150 million annually](#) to support the Science of Reading, while funding to support early math has also grown to over \$100 million annually.

Strategies for Success:

Strategic Priorities

- For over five years, TCS has maintained a consistent focus on four instructional priorities: K-12 literacy, K-12 numeracy, school culture and climate, and college and

career readiness. District leaders attribute the successful results largely to this stability, emphasizing a strategy of refining and deepening these existing priorities annually instead of introducing new initiatives.

- The district credits strong alignment of its work from the board of education through school leadership to classroom practice with high expectations and shared structures across all 21 schools. Board members engage directly with academic data, and on occasion, visit classrooms to observe instructional priorities in action, reinforcing alignment between governance, budget, and classroom practice.

Investing in Human Capital and Data-driven Problem Solving

- TCS has expanded literacy coaches and specialists from K-3 into middle and high schools, and added intervention teachers at the secondary level to diagnose and address reading difficulties for older students. The district built the same staffing model for mathematics.
- More than 90% of the district's summer learning budget is dedicated to personnel, reflecting a deliberate strategy to prioritize instructional quality and staffing over materials or programming costs.
- District leaders made a deliberate choice to prioritize skilled personnel over technology purchases or packaged programs.
- The district invested in needs-based professional learning aligned to observed deficits. Central office staff conducted on-site needs assessments in buildings to identify specific struggles teachers were having, and designed coaching and professional learning to address those gaps.
- The district developed a pipeline of strong instructional leaders, with principals expected to set and inspect high expectations for instruction, use learning targets consistently, and lead data analysis in their buildings.
- TCS holds Project Success meetings as a part of its [Professional Learning Communities](#). These meetings include regular, structured data reviews between each school's leadership team and the system leadership team, to identify emerging issues early and align real-time resources around solutions rather than waiting until the end of the year.
- At the individual student level, the [Problem Solving Team](#) meetings convene parents, teachers, coaches and social workers on a monthly cadence to review a student's data and coordinate academic and nonschool support until the student is back on track.

Summer Learning

- Launched in 2017, TCS summer learning peaked with 4,000 students, a majority of the elementary population, plus a meaningful share of secondary students. Planning begins in October of the prior year, and the district communicates with parents of students most at risk to ensure enrollment.
- Since 2019, the district has operated full-day (7.5 hour) summer programs lasting approximately 22 days, adding an average of 165 instructional hours annually. The exact number of instructional hours varies by grade level and student need.
- Summer learning is primarily staffed by district teachers, with additional support from external certified staff and instructional aides when needed. The district uses a highly intentional staffing model, assigning its strongest teachers, based on demonstrated

student growth, to work with students who need the most support, including those identified under state literacy and numeracy benchmarks.

- The Happy Kids Survey, administered since 2017 to students, parents and teachers, measures engagement in TCS's summer learning program. This data is used alongside academic data to assess program effectiveness and inform future changes.
- According to TCS, data shows that students who attend the five-week program halt the typical summer slide. Summer learning also functions as a leadership pipeline: 33% of current assistant principals and 25% of principals were first directors of summer learning programs.
- TCS has served as a [recognized model](#): the district received the [Little Red School House recognition from CLAS \(2023\)](#) and the [Excellence in Summer Learning Award from the National Summer Learning Association \(2023\)](#).

Removing Barriers to Attendance

- TCS operates the [New Heights Community Resource Center](#), a district-owned facility that partners with external providers to deliver mental health services, language translation, employment services, food and clothing assistance, and more to TCS families. Partners occupy space at minimal cost in exchange for serving district students and families.
- Launched in the 2023-24 school year, "[The Zone](#)" is a targeted, geographic initiative that concentrates services around a small number of families in data-identified neighborhoods so young people can thrive academically. Operating out of the New Heights Community Resource Center, the Zone connects families to services including Healthy Homes project, food and clothing, after-school and summer care as well as language translation and mental health.
- The district hired part-time "traveling teachers" as well as social workers, counselors and principals to conduct home visits as a part of their efforts to improve student attendance and engagement.
- TCS placed buses and specific drivers directly at schools so students who missed their regular bus or whose bus didn't arrive could still get to school.